



The Tricentennial

Volume 2, Issue Nine

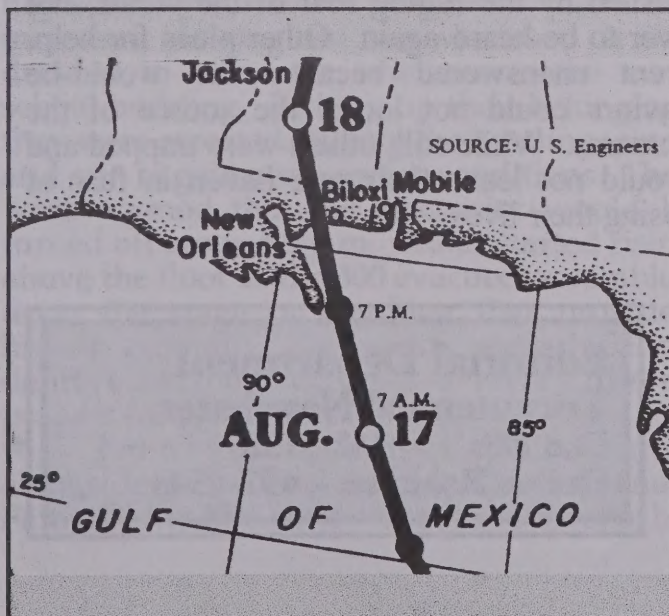
August 12, 1999

Upon the Waters Camille Commemoration

Billy McDonald, Mayor of Pass Christian will lead ceremonies in commemoration for those who died as a result of the devastation caused by the Killer Storm of 1969.

A special observance will take place by casting a remembrance wreath into the Gulf waters in memory of the deceased. Public officials, guests, and the general public are invited to assemble at 11 a.m. on Tuesday, August 17, 1999, at the municipal pier jetting out from the West Harbor parking lot.

Thirty years ago, shortly after 10 p.m., on August 17, 1969, the eye of Camille drove fiercely upon the Bay of St. Louis, thrusting its fury with winds greater than 225-mph, and tidal surges up to 30 feet high. The unbridled action ravished the land, the homes, the buildings and left 78 dead in Pass Christian. At that time, former mayor J.J. Wittmann was overheard to say, "I am mayor of a city, but in name only!"



There are still signs of "steps to nowhere" and gnarled Live Oaks, even after 30 years. During this period a slow growth has returned to the Pass with an obedience to adhere to evacuation orders as was experienced in the past threat by the *Georges Hurricane*.

As monuments to the memory of "Camille," there is a large cut stone in Memorial Park with all of the names of the deceased. In addition, the current City Hall was built as a memory to that storm of 1969.

This *Tricentennial Newsletter* edition is dedicated to the memory of those who sacrificed their lives by remaining to confront the storm, and also to the citizens of Pass Christian who are stronger now as survivors.

Collage Weekend

The *Festival of Arts* and *Celebrate the Gulf* come together once more in a fantastic weekend for young and old. This family oriented Octoberfest weekend will provide Marine aquatic exhibits at the Harbor, while 50 artists will be displaying and selling their art works at Memorial Park.

"*Celebrate the Gulf*", a Marine Education Festival, has been an annual event which involves environmental issues, marine life, recreational and commercial activities, and even live snakes and alligators. There will also be special fishing rodeo for the youngsters, teaching them to be adept in "catching and releasing" live fish. Contestants must bring their own bait and rod. A special treat this year, will be a "Marine Cuisine" tent where Coast Chefs will demonstrate how to choose, prepare, and cook local seafood. Celebrate will be under their own tents at the Harbor on Saturday, October 2nd, 10am to 4pm.

(Continue to next page)

Another annual event is the *"Collage - Festival of Arts"*. Beneath the shade of the Memorial Park's Live Oaks, a special gourmet lunch will be provided by the Acadian Grill Restaurant. Arts and Crafts booths will blanket the park and will provide a delightful weekend to stroll through the arts encampment while listening to live music. There will also be a "Preview Party" with cocktails, heavy hors d'oeuvres, and music held at a local historical home where selected artworks will be judged. These activities will be conducted on October 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. For information, call Georgia Leyser, 452-7879, or Susie Michael at 452-3261.

Camille Remembered

As on any Friday during the heat of Summer, the Coast was filled with tourists. There was little concern for weather reports, the sun was still shining. Hotels and Motels had not turned off their "No Vacancy" signs for the weekend. Late that afternoon, radios alerted that the tropical storm had converted into Hurricane Camille and was being tracked south of Miami after cutting across Cuba. Early on Saturday, the Coastal area from Biloxi to St. Marks, Florida was placed on "Watch". In escalating moments, TV stations started advising evacuation of certain areas such as Grand Isle in Louisiana. Early Sunday, August 17th the Storm was southeast of New Orleans by more than 200 miles. Then, a *"Hurricane Warning"* was announced for the entire Mississippi Coast with an advisory to evacuate. The transmogrification of a tropical storm had ultimately become an unbridled and omnipotent Hurricane.

At 6 p.m., that Sunday, August 17, 1969, the siren alarm at the Pass Christian Fire Station sounded loudly proclaiming the Hurricane's imminent approach. Earlier, Chief of Police Jerry Peralta led his small force of patrolmen throughout the "Pass" assisting in the evacuation process. Many of the townsfolk were hurricane resistant in that they had weathered many killer storms before, causing them to persist in holding their ground.

Just after ten p.m., that fraughtful night, Camille struck with an inestimable fury. It plowed up the bay channel between Bay St. Louis and Henderson Point. The Mississippi Coast, in particular Pass Christian, was becoming devastated by winds clocked at more than 200 mph and tidal surges of up to 30 feet. The unforeseen tidal wave moved across the beaches, across highway 90 and literally inundated the town.

A mass of water, with rolling breakers on top, was so mammoth that many buildings and houses were instantly smashed to pieces. A solid wall of water advanced over and past Scenic Drive, crashing down the ridge toward Second Street, and crossed the railroad tracks, rolling northward.

Then a second rush of water bombarded and submerged most of the Town. The bayous backed up to meet the Gulf tidal waters resulting in flooding the streets 5 to 15 feet deep, depending on what part of Town it settled in. Automobiles were submerged causing emergency vehicles to be rendered useless.

As the evening proceeded, the hurtling winds picked up in excess of 200 mph. There were many valiant deeds performed that night by civil defense personnel, law enforcement officers, firemen, military personnel and civilians in safeguarding others in distress. Screams for assistance were answered with daring rescues while other screams were hushed by the raging roar of the winds, not ever to be heard again. Other pleas for help, went unanswered because the would-be saviors could not locate the source of the screams. While still, others were trapped and would not leave their safe haven in fear of losing their lives.

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Times of Peril

Many hundreds of "Pass" residents spent the most terrifying night of their lives not knowing just how much longer they could hold on. Many of them had ample time to reflect the wisdom of their decision in staying with their homes, rather than evacuating as directed. Facing the hazards of the evening, resulted in a number of ill-fated accounts which have been retold over and over again. Some exaggerated, some misleading and some unwarranted fatalities.

By six that evening, the broadcasters were finally forecasting a Mississippi intrusion. The winds picked up and the "people traffic" picked up as well.

● George Watson was alerted that Sunday at 11:30 a.m. to assume his post at his designated shelter at Pass High Gymnasium. The people in the low areas were being evacuated first. Watson's daughter, Phyllis, was indoctrinated in the process of registering the trickling admission of stubborn refugees. They had experienced too many past false alarms to anticipate what would happen in the next few hours. ---And, with reason, radio announcements were still predicting a path towards Louisiana.

Concern for the security of the highschool gymnasium was raised, the winds increased blowing out two windows. It was decided to move the evacuees to the main school building. Picking up their belongings they were escorted out into the howling winds and rain to gain more secure conditions. They were warned that the electricity would be turned off around 9 p.m. Water started rising above the floor as the 300 evacuees scrambled upon the stage or anything that provided higher ground. The winds were hurtling debris upon the structure as everyone uttered prayers for protection.

● From Mother of Mercy Catholic Church, alongside the railroad tracks off Davis Avenue, Father Philip McLoone went to a number of his

people's homes urging them to leave, but they refused, saying that they had ridden out other storms and they were not afraid. At 10:00 p.m., he forced his housekeeper Miss Myrtle and her sister to leave for the Civil Defense Shelter set up at St. Paul's auditorium. By the time they arrived evading falling trees and strewn live wires, the winds were blowing so hard they had to hold to one another.

Father left them to seek out more refugees. During the height of the storm, he gave last rites to an old lady who had a heart attack and was dying.

The Mourning Sun

As the morning sun began to give light, small groups forayed outside to confront the devastation of the evening before. They realized that their prayers were answered as the sleepless throngs filed out to evidence the demolished gymnasium.

● About 10 pm the glass windows broke on the front porch. The water rose higher and higher. Edith Byrd de Vries had gotten out of her wheelchair and was standing inside a closet holding onto a walker. The walls cracked, the mirror and pictures fell, and furniture was being pushed about by thrashing waters.

She and her daughter, along with the tenants from the back-house hoisted each other to the attic. As the water rose the Lafiollette men punctured a hole through the roof. Her daughter was thrown into the stampeding water and retrieved the next day. The Lafiollette's floated aboard a section of roofing throughout the night. DeVries was blown off the roof and into the water, for what she described as the "wildest ride of my life". Bruised and badly battered, drenched and cold, she was finally rescued by Navy Seabees two days later. The front steps were all that was left of her home.

● Mary Ann Gerlach has often been reported as the only surviving person from the beachfront Richelieu Apartments on Highway 90. Over the years, it has also been recounted that 23 others stayed to "party the night away". The story was mistakenly reported as such in national news media the day following Camille and continues as a myth in commemoration releases by local and national news media.

The news of an approaching hurricane had promoted an excuse for a "Hurricane Party." Gerlach and her husband Fritz had stocked up on food and booze for the evening. They had worked late the previous night, so they decided to take a nap before partying with the other apartment tenants. She was awakened by strong gusts of wind and siding boards being ripped off the complex. Jumping up, she jerked her husband from sleep. She looked up as the walls cracked open and the third floor above her was about to crumble down upon them. Her husband Fritz didn't want to leave because he couldn't swim. The rising waters gushed around her. Instinctively, she grabbed onto a cushion as the waves pushed her out a window. She noted that the waters were also thrashing against the top floor where the other tenants had been. She couldn't distinguish anyone, but she could still see the lights, as she was being washed away. Then the lights went under water and the third floor of the hurricane-proof apartment complex tumbled into the murky Gulf-tide swirling waters.

Gerlach swam while clinging to pieces of floating debris. She was exhausted from being in the water from 11 p.m. until 5:30 the next morning. She was found bleeding, skinned up, and limp as a rag doll atop a mountain of debris. Her husband's body was found bloated and battered beyond recognition except for a diamond ring that she had given him for their second wedding anniversary.

● Another of the surviving tenants of the Richelieu was a young, off-duty Seabee. Realizing his foolish act of remaining to party, he gave second thought on remaining there. As the winds and waters further imperiled their haven, he suggested that the roof of the building would be more secure. Mrs. Zoe Matthews went up with him while her husband refused to go. Observing that the

building was about to collapse, the Seabee told Mrs. Matthews to hold onto his waist as he swam to the safety of a nearby floating roof top. Upon leaping out, Mrs. Matthews became disengaged from her protector by the water's turbulence. Needless-to-say, the Seabee lived to help out with the morning rescue crews.

● Paul Williams, the church sexton, was concerned about the uncertainty of his home, so he called the Pastor for permission to bring his family to ride out the impending storm. Williams moved his large family to what he thought was the safety of a building that had survived 18 hurricanes. It had been constructed in 1849.

The water began to flow into the building rising upstairs and causing loose items to tumble down. One by one each family member was raised to the highest level. As Williams attempted to climb a ladder to join his family the wind and water took control. The boards cracked open. Williams was swept across the street to Live Oak cemetery where he found refuge in the fork of a tree. During the night he watched the mounting debris, the toppling tombstones, and regurgitating coffins popping out from recently dug graves.

The misfortune at Trinity Episcopal Church was the worst single tragedy to occur in Pass Christian's history. Camille claimed 13 members of the Williams' family. Paul Williams survived along with one son, Malcolm, and his son-in-law, Erin Burton. In an adjoining building, the Pastor's wife was also lost.

The next morning, with the assistance of rescue workers, Williams and the other two family survivors began the grisly task of recovering the bodies of their loved ones. The irony of the incident was that the Williams' house had escaped the storm unharmed.

Chief Jerry Peralta remembered watching the recovery of the bodies from Live Oak Cemetery. "The thing that hurt me most . . . was Williams with his family, as I watched him carrying those bodies. He carried them out of the cemetery and laid them on the sidewalk", stated Peralta, during an interview prior to his death in 1982.

● Of another incident on that dreadful night, 84 year old John Dambrink Sr., "feeble minded"; and his wife, Anna, "bed-ridden and wheel-chair bound" with arthritis in her spine, were not leaving their home. Daughter Elizabeth, known as "Sis", had for years nursed the Dambrink's in their old age. Piet Stegenga, a step-son and his wife Valena, decided to remain with the family together with step-brother John Dambrink, Jr. Piet, Valena, and John Jr. survived. Sis and the old folks died.

As the hurricane hurled its full strength, Sis, Piet and John Jr. were in the kitchen drinking coffee. The old man had gone to bed. Valena was taking coffee to Mother Dambrink when all of a sudden water started rising from the floor. The water kept coming up and the old man started hollering. Piet and Sis took him outside to raise him up on top of the family car, but in fighting the restraining hands, he slipped from the car roof and was carried off by the raging waters. Then the house caved in. Valena managed to stay afloat by catching on to furniture and passing debris. Amazingly, Piet and Valena were reunited in the flowing waters and clung together on a piece of plywood until the next morning. John Jr. was found hanging in a pine tree alive. Bodies of the deceased were not found until a week later.

● The Barrett's decided that they would ultimately be more secure in accepting the invitation of their friends, the Chauvin's in their beach-front home on West Beach. Within a few hours, the house became completely deluged by the surging tide which killed eight members of the two families. There were nine others who survived the shocking explosion resulting from the raging tide. Fortunately, they had opened windows on the second level, both in the front and the rear of the house. Those houses which remained tightly buckled up exploded in loud bursts hurling out all that was inside.

● Other Pass family victims were the Smith's, the McDonald's, the Barne's, and the Alexander's along with their two children. The Schuyten's were father and son. Their bodies were found tied to the Bayou Portage bridge. The raging water and floating debris had torn much of the skin from their dangling torsos. The only armor of protection they had was

their life jackets which had failed them.

As the night drew to a close, the water started receding. People began assisting others in need. Well before daylight more and more people began moving about, almost totally on foot, because vehicles had been under water and would not operate. The streets were blocked with debris and fallen trees. Then came the dawn.

... And all the people gathered themselves as one man into the street that was before the watergate (Nehemiah: 8:1)

The day following *Camille* was Monday, the 18th of August. Many families were found dazed and in shock. The yards were strewn with debris as those who persevered looked with incredulity at their damaged homes. Others were found standing on fractured sidewalks stirred by untested emotions as they stared with disbelief at their demolished dwellings. From prior storm experiences, they believed their homes to be fortified from rising waters.

Daylight brought relief and concern. Relief was in the verity that the storm had passed, abating the fears of the night and that many friends and relatives had survived. Concern then turned in review of the destruction in evidencing the full extent of damage and in counting the dead.

Initial recovery started with the survivors trying to do for themselves. They attempted to clear pathways through the major streets. The end of the first day impacted more than physical exhaustion. Emotional trauma began to influence their behavior. There was no electricity, no water, no telephones, no newspaper deliveries, and thus, no way to communicate with the rest of the world. Rescue Teams consisted of local citizens and the local police force, and members of the Civil Defense, the American Red Cross, and the National Guard. Lines of command and authority became a continuing problem in reclaiming and identifying the deceased bodies.

Major relief from outside Pass Christian didn't come about until weeks later.

Realization finally precipitated the survived ones as to the intense clean-up that was in front of them. Those survivors who were too old to work and those who would not pitch-in to work, were sent off to Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg. Only the strong of body and mind and spirit remained to share in the long dreary task confronting them. A spirited comraderie evolved amongst the townsfolk. American flags appeared as they were found and raised in a demonstration of patriotism for the supreme survivalist feeling that they each began to share.

During this period, there were two weeks of "Communal Utopia", in which all of the citizenry who worked in the big clean-up became warm comrades. Black, White, rich, poor ate together consuming the same food prepared at "Pass" High School. All used the same plates and utensils. They all bathed in the same artesian wells together. They learned to laugh together as they encountered "steps to nowhere" and bath tubs hanging in mid-air. The energy of the townsfolk continued to be in top spirits and upon meeting each other, they would often have an interesting story to pass on.

Through it all, day after day, the American flag was on display, always waving, always confirming the courage of it's citizens. Patriotism was fueled by the inspired and spirited citizens to rebuild.

THE MEMORIAL

It was estimated that 1000 to 1200 citizens of the "Pass" had refused to evacuate. Of these, 78 succumbed to the wrath of Camille. Some of the deceased bodies have never been found. An elaborate stone monument, etched with the names of the fatalities, was placed in War Memorial Park on September 15, 1993.

Mrs. Inez Bourdin, wife of Billy Bourdin, had initiated the idea for a commemoration which would signal each of the deceased casualties of Camille. She began the arduous task of reviewing the names of the victims when she had taken ill and passed away. Billy Bourdin then assumed the completion of the research. There were so many

varying accounts of recorded dead that verification and authenticity was tedious. It required cross referencing the Red Cross files with listings from the discontinued "*Tarpon Beacon*" local newspaper. The proper spelling of names became a greater trial, since all court records had been destroyed. Billy even had to seek out grave stones in various cemeteries in his quest to seek proper substantiation. Other major difficulties were that a significant number of the deceased were "new comers" to the "Pass" and had not been known by the "old timers".

The local chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, in the mean time had taken up the challenge of collecting individual donations from residents in the "Pass". Everyone realized that too much time had passed without offering a remembrance to those unfortunate residents who lost their lives in the biggest Killer Storm ever. The collection effort was short of the required funding for the elaborate memorial decided upon. County Supervisor David LaRosa came to the aid of the cause and funded the necessary balance.

It was the wishes of Mrs. Inez Bourdin, that the memorial be established as a commemoration in observance of friends and strangers who attempted to pass the night, but who died in grave anguish. The stone legacy is to remind descendants and visitors to the monument, that death can happen to anyone, even within the twinkling of an eye.

There were other casualties derived from the grief suffered by some of the survivors. Many still refuse to discuss that night. One committed suicide. The reported sole survivor of the "Richelieu", Mrs. Gerlach was imprisoned for shooting her 11th husband in 1981. She commented that she felt the emotional trauma and physical pain she had lived with, was a contributing factor in the killing.

On August 17, 1994, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Camille, the Speakers gave eulogy to the Camille dead, but reminded the people of Mississippi that never again should such a large number of lives be lost because **the Legislature passed statutes making forced evacuation a law**, and also, a new building code with more restrictive constraint laws was passed.

CAMILLE

DEDICATED TO THOSE WHO
LOST THEIR LIVES TO
HURRICANE CAMILLE

AUGUST 17, 1969

ALEXANDER, GRANVILLE JACK
ALEXANDER, GRANVILLE, JR.
ALEXANDER, HUEY
ALEXANDER, Mrs MARY
BAGG, Mrs A.C. "Fanny"
BARKER, HANNAH L.
BARNES, LEONARD
BARNES, Mrs LEONARD
BARRETT, Mrs ARDEN
BARRETT, CHARLOTTE
BARRETT, VICTORIA "VICKEY"
BELLEHUMEUR, JANET
BENOIT, AMELIA
BISHOP, ELIZABETH
BLOODWORTH, WILLIAM H.
BOYER, MERLIN
BURTON, WILLIAM
CARMICHAEL, TOM
CHAUVIN, CHRISTIAN MARIE
CHAUVIN, DIEDRA
CHAUVIN, JAMES
CHAUVIN, KATHLEEN "KATHY"
CHAUVIN, Mrs THERESA S.
CHAUVIN, Mrs WANDA
CORNELL, CYNTHIA LOUISE
COVINGTON, WILLIAM HOWARD
DAMBRINK, Mrs ANNA
DAMBRINK, ELIZABETH Stegenga

DAMBRINK, JOHN, Sr.
DANIELS, ALINE
DEMETZ, Mrs BONNIE
DYKES, ARTHUR
EVERETT, Mrs JULIA McDONALD
GERLACK, FREDRICK E.
GESHKE, SHIRLEY ANN
GREEN, ANDREW H.
HALL, Mrs JERRY
HARDIN, Mrs HELEN
HOLLINS, MARGARET
JONES, DOUGLAS
JONES, Mrs HELEN C.
JONES, MERWIN
KELLER, LUANNE "LOUANN"
LUNDBERG, Mrs ALLEN "ELLEN"
LUTIGE, ANNABELLE M.
LUTTGE, Mrs WILLIAM R.
MATTHEWS, JACK

THREE UNIDENTIFIED BODIES

"HOPE"

"FAITH"

"CHARITY"

ONE OF THESE BODIES FOUND
IN OR NEAR CITY HALL

IN MEMORY OF: INEZ BOURDIN

MATTHEWS, ZOE
McBRYDE, OLIVE A.
McDONALD, HUGH
McDONALD, Mrs HUGH
MOFFETT, ROY
NORMAN, WILLIE JAMES
SCHUYTEN, ANDREW HARTWIG, JR
SCHUYTEN, ANDREW HARTWIG, SR
SMITH, GEORGE JR
SMITH, HELEN
SMITH Mrs MARY "MARIE"
SMITH, MARY LOUISE
SMITH, ROSE
STALLWORTH, WILLIE "One-Eye"
WAGGNER, ALBIN C.
WILLIAMS, ANNA
WILLIAMS, BRIDGETT "Burton"
WILLIAMS, CHARLES
WILLIAMS, CLARA MAY
WILLIAMS, DEBORAH
WILLIAMS, EDDIE KEITH
WILLIAMS, ESTHER
WILLIAMS, FLOYD
WILLIAMS, JEREMIAH
WILLIAMS, MYRTLE M. "1921", Mrs
WILLIAMS, MYRTLE M. "1947"
WILLIAMS, SYLVESTER
WILLIAMS, OTIS

The above monument was placed in the War Memorial Park in the City of Pass Christian on November 25, 1993 by the Veterans of Foreign Wars - Post #5931 as inspired by the initiation of Mrs. Inez Bourdin and completed and compiled by her husband, Mr. Billy Bourdin.

On the average, the Mississippi Gulf Coast is struck by hurricane-force winds every nine years. These statistics have been derived from the time of the first recorded storm in 1717. These factors do not stop the population growth on the Coast, nor does it cause the long time residents to leave. The people of the Coast have a great affinity for their habitat, more so, here in Pass Christian.

And Jesus said, *"I am the one who raises the dead and gives them life again. Anyone who believes in me, even though he died like anyone else, shall live again. He is given eternal life for believing in me and shall never perish."* John 11:25,26



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PAID
Pass Christian, MS
Permit No. 2

Downtown - showing old City Hall at Market Ave.

